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AUTHOR Baker, Anthony D.
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ABSTRACT

Noting a recent trend in scholarship of using narratives to warn teachers of the possible dangers of un-theorized and uncritical utilization of technology in the writing classroom, this paper offers a story that does not involve students, anonymous messages, or private files that inadvertently become public, but instead concerns a series of communications between educators involving discourse in several different media: email, memos, and business letters. According to the paper, the story illustrates the need to focus this critical examination not only on electronic communication but also on the various media of written communication. The paper examines the discourse to address the differences between email documents and written letters, how the different discourse media are used by their writers, and how the discourse medium affects the conversation. It concludes that in the discourse (regarding staffing policy), power relationships among the three educators are made visible, are negotiated, and are subverted in such seemingly neutral formal devices such as inside addresses and letterheads. The paper shows that each writer stakes out a particular subject position and proceeds to construct specific identities for the reader by exploiting the formal aspects of the chosen discourse medium. It contends that shifting discourse from one forum to another without critical examination of the chosen media is dangerous. Administrative communication, it is suggested, like any writing tool used in or out of the classroom, requires critical attention as it is used. (NKA)

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Anthony D. Baker
adbake01@homer.louisville.edu
University of Louisville
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Building Boundaries in Writing Programs: The Dangers of Shifting Discourse in Administrative Communication

In the field of composition and electronic communication, a recent trend in scholarship is the use of narratives to warn teachers of the possible dangers of un-theorized and uncritical utilization of technology in the writing classroom. These stories illustrate ways in which computer applications can perpetuate traditional notions of power relationships among students and teachers (Hawisher and Selfe, Hawisher, Janangelo). Vivid accounts of electronic sexual harassment, flaming, and panopticism have helped illustrate the negative aspects of the uninhibited behaviors that seem to be encouraged by email and other forms of electronic communication (Takayoshi, Janangelo). Many of these horror stories involve a writer exploiting his or her capability to remain anonymous in public spaces such as chat rooms or bulletin boards, or they involve personal messages or files reaching a wider audience than the sender or writer intended, due to a miskey or to someone else's hacking ability. Most of these stories deal with student-student or teacher-student relationships, or even relationships between teaching colleagues. We learn from these stories that we have the responsibility to examine critically the technology that we and our students incorporate into our communication practices. Today I offer a story that doesn't involve students, anonymous messages, or private files that inadvertently become public. It is a series of communications between consenting adults--a composition instructor and his writing program administrators--involving discourse in several different media: email, memos, and business letters. My story illustrates the need to focus this critical examination not only on electronic communication, but also on the various media of written communication.

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For Lev Vygotsky, writing is a sign system, a psychological tool, a means of social mediation, a technology which mediates the user's interaction with others (Haas 14,16). Christina Haas explains that because "writing is, or relies on, technological systems as well as sign systems," it operates and has the potential to transform social relationships on both a psychological and a "material-technological" level (16). Therefore, any change in the material circumstances of writing during a series of communications may have important implications for meaning in that particular discourse. In other words, switching from one material circumstance to another (i.e. email to written memos and business letters) can alter the meaning of the discourse.

As a non-participant in the original exchanges that I'm calling a story, I examine the discourse as it exists now, in its electronic and paper trail, in order to address these questions: What are the differences between email documents and written letters? How are the different discourse media used by their writers? How does the medium of discoure affect the conversation?

Before attempting to answer these questions, I'll tell the story. Its characters are Ray, an adjunct writing instructor at a small state university, Linda, and Norm, both co-coordinators of the university's writing program. For the spring 1997 semester, Ray was among the adjunct instructors assigned to teach a single section of first-year composition, while a number of other adjuncts were assigned two and even three sections each. Ray stopped by Linda's office one morning to express his concern and confusion about the course assignment policy. This visit to Linda's office initiated a series of seventeen communiqués between Ray, Linda, and Norm: ten email and seven paper documents over the period of two months.

Linda responds to Ray's concerns by sending him a lengthy email message that narrates and defends her decisions to assign courses to specific instructors. She also forwards to him an earlier email memo sent to all writing instructors that explains in general the factors influencing course assignments. Linda's defense raises more questions about course assignment policies for Ray, especially in regard to the roles of teaching experience and performance evaluation for adjunct instructors. Over the next month, their discussion escalates over email, and Norm

schedules a meeting for the three of them to discuss the issues. The meeting does very little to alleviate Ray's concerns; in fact, he becomes more convinced that spring staffing was not assigned according to the writing program's stated policies. He offers Norm an alternative model for course assignment, he accuses Norm and Linda of undervaluing adjunct instructors, and he argues extensively that Linda is merely attempting to rationalize her unfair assignment procedures and policy miscommunication. Linda writes that Ray is "impugning her integrity," Ray defends his position, and he stresses his dedication to quality teaching. Norm writes in support of Linda's scheduling decisions and suggests that Ray make better use of his time and theirs by discontinuing the discussion. Near the end of the semester, Ray still feels that his concerns have not been fully addressed. The discussion ends after two months, and Ray receives his assignment to teach two sections for the following semester.

All three participants in the discussion rely on email for the first month, and all three use only written documents in the second month. Most of the email and written documents are similar in their specific purposes: the writer is defending his or her interpretation of the staffing policy and its application to specific staffing decisions. Only in Norm's communications is there a clear distinction between his use of electronic and written messages: he uses email only to schedule the meeting between Ray and the co-coordinators. He uses the discourse medium of the business letter to discuss the conflict. Linda's general policy for using email is explained in her second email message to Ray:

> Not only has the Dean asked us to use it to save paper, but time constraints of administrative work make it desirable, as well. However, I try to use e-mail only when a uniform message can go out to program faculty. . . . I continue to communicate by e-mail on an individual basis, letting each person know the tentative assignment and asking whether it is still within the parameters of the faculty member's availability, etc.

Email, for Linda, is a convenient way to communicate with faculty members as a group and then individually. Following Ray's visit to her office, Linda initiates the medium of email for the discussion of the staffing policy; she decides that the forum for discussion will be an electronic

forum by addressing his concerns in an email message. She begins, "I have examined my materials this morning on the spring staffing since you stopped by, to refresh my own memory of what transpired" and closes with the comment, "I will be happy to discuss the matter with you further if you wish." For Linda, email is the medium most appropriate for the early discussion of the policy conflict. The only difference in the content of her email messages and her later business letters is the escalation of the discussion; she continues to defend and clarify her position.

Ray follows Linda's lead and uses email to seek answers to his questions about the staffing policy. After a month of email exchanges, it is Ray who initiates the change from email to print media. According to Ray, his choice to abandon email was merely due to the fact that he happened to be at home on the evening he wrote his first printed memo. For Ray, the medium was not relevant to the policy discussion; the switch to letter-writing was a result of email inaccessibility. After Ray's memo, all participants in the discussion abandon the electronic forum in favor of the print forum initiated by Ray.

Before examining several of these email messages, memos, and business letters, it's necessary to describe the formal aspects that characterize each medium. All of the email messages in this series of exchanges fit into what Michael Spooner and Kathleen Yancey call the dimension of "email simple":

> Much like writing a letter, it is signaled by greetings, . . . closings, and other conventions; sometimes the author composes online, sometimes uploads a prepared text; author and topic are not unique, but audience is (as in letters). In its affective dimension, it feels like a hybrid form, combining elements one would expect in letters, on the phone, or in face-to-face conversation. (254)

While email may feel "like a hybrid form," all email messages, regardless of content, are automatically stamped at the top of the document with the time, date, and electronic addresses or name of both sender and recipient, as well as a space for typing a subject line. The stamp is basically the same for all users of email, regardless of professional affiliation or job title. The standardized electronic stamp makes a typed return address and inside address rather unnecessary. In the printed forum, memos are very similar to email messages, often including only Date, To,

From, and Subject lines. Since writers send memos only to people inside their organization, there is no inside address or return address. A business letter, however, is designed to travel outside one's own organization, and therefore includes both a return address and an inside address. The information contained in a return address may be pre-printed on a letterhead. Letterheads often employ graphics and colored fonts and are often preprinted on paper of heavier weight and in colors other than standard white bond. A business letter written on letterhead paper appears as an official document professionally sanctioned by the business. Business letters written without preprinted letterheads appear to be official in format but lack the automatic sense of the writer's professional affiliation with a particular employer. Now that I've sketched out some surface format differences among the three discourse media, we can examine the role of media in the story of Ray, Linda, and Norm.

Ray's first print document on the staffing issue, following nearly a month of communicating by email messages, is a long, informal memo to Norm and Linda designed to summarize his case prior to meeting with them. I call it an informal memo because it doesn't adhere to the memo header conventions I just described; its header includes only the date and the salutation: "Norm and Linda." There is no subject line or From line, and of course there is no return address or letterhead and no inside address. He closes his memo simply with "Sincerely, Ray Johnson." He follows the same exact format in his next memo, just after the meeting, in which he attempts to summarize his impression of the meeting to Norm. Ray's first two written documents follow the same formal rules as the earlier email messages written by him, Linda, and Norm. The only two differences are that he types the date in his letter (it is automatically stamped on his email messages) and that he includes his last name in his closing signature. Neither Ray, Linda nor Norm includes a last name in any email closing. Ray's memos mark the end of the discussion on in the medium of email; all further communiqués are in writing. His choice to use a modified memo format seems logical, given that the document is from one employee to other employees, and given that it is hand-delivered to the pigeonhole mailbox without using the postal service. The formal differences between Ray's memos and earlier email messages are significant.

Linda is the first to respond to Ray's first memo and to the particular issues discussed at the meeting. Instead of using a memo format, though, Linda chooses to use a standard business letter format on the school's official letterhead. The letter's inside address includes Ray's name, his title of "Writing Program Instructor," and his office address, which is identical to hers, address preprinted on the letterhead. Her subject line reads "Alleged Misinformation." And her closing includes her last name and her title, "Co-Coordinator of the Writing Program." The business letter format would be appropriate if the letter were to travel outside the walls of the English department, if, for example, she were sending it to Ray's home address. But it is hand-delivered as were Ray's memos. Linda's move to the business letter format formalizes and officializes the discussion; the choice not to use the memo format has the effect of distancing the recipient from the writer. Her use of job titles and of the university's letterhead demonstrate the power relationship between her and Ray in ways that would have been difficult to do in the media of email; Linda clearly outranks him, and she invokes the university's apparent stamp of approval by using its letterhead.

In Ray's response to Linda's letter, he abandons the memo format he previously used in favor of the business letter format used by Linda. Ray does not use the school's preprinted letterhead paper, nor does he use his office address, even though his letter is delivered into Linda's mailbox by his hand; he uses his home address as a return address, a choice that likewise distances him from the writing program and from the university. In the inside address, he not only uses Linda's title as Co-Coordinator, he adds her degree title to her name: "Dr. Linda Boone." One of Ray's contentions in the discussion is that PhD holders are being favored with more class assignments while the staffing policy makes no mention of such a hierarchy. Ray's explicit mention of her doctoral degree distances Linda from his class of undervalued, non-PhD adjuncts. As did Linda's letter, Ray's includes a subject line: "Requests for explanations of staffing policies and of discrepancies in class count." In his closing, Ray uses his full name and a job title different from the one Linda used: "Raymond A. Connell, Adjunct Lecturer in Writing." By re-titling his position to include the word "adjunct," Ray identifies himself with the group he feels is being

slighted by the program. While he adopts all of the formal components modeled by Linda's business letter, Ray uses them to distance himself from Linda and the writing program. He resists her construction of him as being within her system of power and claims agency for himself by using his home address and changing his job title.

Like Linda, Norm also chooses to respond to Ray's memos in a business letter format. This business letter, Norm's only written document in the discourse, differs slightly from Linda's: it includes only a partial inside address for Ray (Ray's name with no title, Writing Program, and the university's name). Linda's had included the full office address--ZIP code and all. Norm's letter includes no Subject line. He closes his letter with his full name and his title: Norman Hayworth, Co-coordinator of Writing. While implications might be drawn from the fact that Ray is given no title in Norm's letter, what I find more intriguing is Ray's response. As he did with Linda's, Ray imitates the exact format of Norm's letter. Like Norm, he includes no Subject line. He includes only a partial inside address, as did Norm (no street address, city, state, or ZIP code). However, Ray does make two changes: he includes a title under his name in the letter's closing (Adjunct Lecturer in Writing), and he adds the PhD designation before Norm's name in the inside address. The rhetorical effects of Ray's addition of his own title and his addition of "Dr." to Norm's name have already been discussed.

[To review,] Ray's initiation of the discourse on the staffing policy is a face-to-face meeting. He then follows Linda's lead by responding in her chosen medium--email. He then adapts email's formal conventions to his informal written memo. Both administrators respond to his memo with business letters, and Ray follows their lead modifying selected information within the business letter's formal conventions. But Ray resists acceptance of the identity constructed in the business letters he receives. His slight modifications to the content in the spaces prescribed by the letters' headings and closings are moves toward a claiming of agency and importance that is consistent with his position on the course staffing issue discussed in the bodies of all of the documents.

The final document that directly addresses the spring 1997 staffing conflict is a business letter from Linda to Ray. The letter is an olive branch, of sorts, in which Linda proposes that the two of them meet after the busy end of the semester to compare notes and reach an understanding. Linda also writes, "I am pleased that you are requesting classes for fall. I have no quarrel with you or your teaching and assume that both of us will continue to conduct ourselves professionally toward the end of serving the [university's] Writing Program." Formally, this business letter differs from her previous letter in three ways: first, she no longer uses Ray's full work address in the inside address. She includes his name, title, and university, just as Norman did in his letter. Such a move drops the pretense of formality inherent in her previous complete inside address, which included his street address and ZIP code; after all, all of these print documents are being delivered by hand, from one office down the hall to another. Second, this conciliatory letter is not printed on letterhead paper. Gone is the automatic affiliation and sanction of the university system--the official-ness--encoded into the heavy preprinted letterhead paper. Third, Linda includes no title for herself in her closing. She seems not to be writing from a Co-coordinator's perspective in this letter; rather she is Linda, colleague, associate. The removal of her title (and the maintaining of his) closes in the distance established in her earlier letter, a move that is consistent with the conciliatory language and content in the body of the letter.

In the discourse on the spring 1997 staffing policy, power relationships between Ray, Linda, and Norman are made visible, are negotiated, and are subverted in such seemingly neutral formal devices such as inside addresses and letterheads. In this story's business letters, each writer stakes out a particular subject position and proceeds to construct specific identities for the reader by exploiting the formal aspects of the chosen discourse medium. The escalation of the discussion of staffing policy manifests itself in shifting the media of discourse to build boundaries between participants. This story shows us that electronic discourse media are not the only communication devices that have the potential to perpetuate traditional power structures; the standard business letter has the same capability. Shifting discourse from one forum to another without critical examination of the chosen media is dangerous. Communication can become

depersonalized, officialized, and power discrepancies can become emphasized and widened, although there is room for subversion of these tendencies.

To a small degree, I have tried to connect our growing knowledge of computer composition theory, which encourages critical examination of tools and technology, to the communication devices of everyday administrative communication. Administrative communication, like any writing tool we might use in or out of the classroom, requires our critical attention as we use it. We need to pay attention to ways writer and reader identities are constructed in different discourse media. We need to consider what it means to use formal devices of particular media. And when choosing one discourse media over another, we need to evaluate to what extent the medium can become the message.

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